

MIGRATION

An Ethnographer's Perspective

By Rosemary Joyce

In the following article, Irma A. Velásquez Nimatuj provides a reflection on the racialized aspects of migration from Central America too often missing in contemporary writing. From her unique perspective as a social anthropologist born in a Maya K'iche' community, she draws on her own experiences and those of her family to make four intertwined points.

First, migration (or mobility) was a normal part of Indigenous life before colonial powers began to control people's movement, and it continued through succeeding centuries, despite a variety of barriers from nation-states. She characterizes as the positive side of migration the opportunities it afforded and continues to afford for commercial exchange, religious participation, and cultural and intellectual exchange.

Second, among Indigenous peoples living under racialized regimes, she traces the ways that opportunities for mobility became split by gender, with women staying in home communities where they were safer from the double vulnerabilities of racial and gender violence. Following the existing patterns of mobility within Central America pursued by men in support of the economic survival of their home communities, migration to the United States was primarily led by men who then sought to bring the family members they had left behind to join them in the United States.

Third, many of the actors and steps in this process may seem to be the same today but have become more dangerous and riskier in recent decades. Velásquez Nimatuj identifies a major watershed in 2006 when the violent conflict between the two then-dominant drug cartels (Sinaloa and Zetas) escalated. Migrants passing through Mexico faced new danger from or obligations to these cartels, resulting in the deaths and disappearances of thousands en route to the United States.

Yet, she notes that migration continued to grow, despite higher costs and greater risks, as the political regimes in the region increased in impunity and corruption. Due to racialized structures of inequality, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have taken no effective steps to increase economic opportunity for the Indigenous population or the lower-income rural population in general. Instead, they profit from the funding sent back from family members in the United States, now a critical part of economies in the region.

Finally, she considers the role of gangs — North American in origin — in the increasing violence in Central America, which has motivated large numbers of children to save their lives by attempting the long journey to the United States alone or with family members. Velásquez Nimatuj argues that the regional governments do not care to retain these youths, many of whom are the grandchildren of marginalized Indigenous people who were displaced during violence in the 1980s.

In her conclusion, she calls for moving from a policy of closing and militarizing the U.S. border, which in recent years has resulted in the violations of children's human rights, towards support for a system of migration that permits thousands of men and women to travel between the United States and their countries of origin. Urging a decolonial rethinking of migration, Velásquez Nimatuj identifies the beneficiaries of the present situation: those who seek cheap labor without social responsibility and nation-states concerned more with asserting territorial integrity than supporting their people. She notes that for Indigenous migrants, the desire is always to return to the land where they were born, but in the historical precedents they follow, movement has always been part of Indigenous practice and will continue to be.

Rosemary A. Joyce is Professor of Anthropology at UC Berkeley and served as the Interim Chair for CLAS, January-June 2021.